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# What JFK would have done in Vietnam

**ROBERT HEALY**

WASHINGTON – Nothing brings more mail than a column on what might have been in Vietnam had John Kennedy lived and been reelected to a second term. There is also considerable misunderstanding of what was happening there when Kennedy was killed and who sent in the first contingent of troops.

But after my recent column on Kennedy, Charles Daly, director of the John F. Kennedy Library, sent me National Security Action Memorandum No. 263, dated Oct. 11, 1963, labeled top secret, eyes only, which was declassified in 1977. In essence, the memorandum confirms the notion that Kennedy was prepared to wind down the war, put the heat on then-President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam to train his forces to take over the fighting, and begin withdrawing American advisers to ARVN (Army of the Republican of Vietnam) units.

Kennedy, in his last press conference, had suggested these actions, but the NSC memo has the force of a presidential order, with instructions to the secretaries of state and defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Kennedy did not send the first US advisers to the ARVN units. When he took over as president in 1961, there were about 2,500 American soldiers operating as advisers. Kennedy increased that number to 16,000.

But by the time of his death, Kennedy had become suspicious of what the generals were requesting and what they could do with what they received.

He sent Robert McNamara, secretary of defense, and Gen. Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam, and at a meeting on Oct. 5, 1963, the president adopted their recommendations.

Their recommendations, contained in the National Security Action memorandum, said that Diem should be informed by the American commanding officer in South Vietnam of "the military changes necessary to complete the military campaign in the northern and central areas ... by the end of 1964 and in the [Mekong] Delta ... by the end of 1965."

In order to do this, the memo recommended, "A program be established to train Vietnamese so that essential functions now performed by the US military personnel can be carried out by the Vietnamese by the end of 1965. It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of US personnel by that time."

It also recommended, "In accordance with the program to train progressively Vietnamese to take over military functions, the Defense Department should announce in the very near future presently prepared plans to withdraw 1,000 US military personnel by the end of 1963."

There were several recommendations to put the heat on Diem to go along with these proposals.

McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser, told McNamara and Dean Rusk, the secretary of state, in a covering memo that the president had approved the report, but had directed that no formal announcement be made of the withdrawal of the 1,000 troops by the end of 1963. Kennedy had anticipated that he would be facing Barry Goldwater, a hawk on Vietnam, in the 1964 election, and he proceeded cautiously on making announcements.

But in his last press conference, Kennedy spoke of the withdrawal recommendation. "Well, as you know, when Secretary McNamara and Gen. Taylor came back, they announced that we would expect to withdraw a thousand men from South Vietnam before the end of the year, and there has been some reference to that by Gen. Harkins. If we are able to do that, that would be our schedule."

The point is that Kennedy was moving toward the same pattern for settlement as he had followed in Laos, where negotiations had brought about a neutral government and the withdrawal of troops.

For the record: A recent column on the Joseph Kennedy-Chester Atkins contest for the seat on the House Appropriations Committee stated that Rep. Edward Markey had voted on the secret ballot for Atkins. Markey said he voted on the first and second ballot for Kennedy.

Another recent column stated that 1932 was the year of the Calvin Coolidge-Herbert Hoover transition of power. The transition year was 1928-29.

*Robert Healy is an associate editor of the Globe.*